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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this longitudinal qualitative inquiry was to describe the socially constructed, negotiated, and contextual nature of an early field placement in an urban elementary school. The objectives were to document subtle changes over time in preservice teachers' reading/language arts subject matter knowledge and teaching beliefs and behaviors in an early field placement, and to determine how the contextual influences of an urban elementary school contribute to these changes in both positive and negative ways. The participants in the study were 75 elementary education majors enrolled in a reading/language arts methods block designated as an early field experience. Data sources were formal and informal observations, interviews, field notes, dialogue journals, final reflective statements, and interpretations of researcher-devised illustrations depicting teaching methods. Results indicated that most of the preservice teachers experienced increasing frustrations after a few teaching sessions, became preoccupied with group management concerns, did not construct knowledge about reading/language arts until the end of the semester, developed a sense of responsibility and concern for students' instructional and emotional needs, came to value the field experience, experienced a decrease in prejudice towards culturally diverse and at-risk students, and became more flexible. Educational implications are discussed. (Contains 25 references.) (JDD)

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"This School Is a Terrible Place. The Kids Don't Listen": Contextual Influences on Preservice Teachers' Professional Growth in an Early Field Placement

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"This School Is a Terrible Place. The Kids Don't Listen": Contextual Influences on Preservice Teachers' Professional Growth in an Early Field Placement

Please Note: For this study 1) professional growth is defined as changes over time in preservice teachers' subject matter knowledge and/or teaching beliefs and behaviors (Kagan, 1992); and 2) qualitative inquiry is that which, in part, employs artistically-based methods for the purpose of revealing the meaning of events on participants (Eisner, 1991).

Purpose/Objectives: The purpose of this longitudinal qualitative inquiry was to provide "rich, 'thick' description of the socially constructed, negotiated, and contextual nature" of an early field placement in an urban elementary school (Geertz, 1973; Teitelbaum & Britzman, 1991). The objectives were to 1) document subtle changes over time in preservice teachers' reading/language arts subject matter knowledge and teaching beliefs and behaviors in an early field placement; and 2) determine how the contextual influences of an urban elementary school contribute to these changes in both positive and negative ways.

Theoretical Perspective: A fundamental factor affecting what preservice teachers learn in a field placement is the school context in which teaching occurs. Therefore, careful attention to the selection of that context is crucial (Kilgore, Ross, &

Zbikowski, 1990). For example, when preservice teachers from a middle socioeconomic milieu are placed in an urban teaching context, they have opportunities to 1) become aware of their students' needs (e.g., "These kids are just like kids everywhere who need love and acceptance"); 2) adopt more constructivist views and practices (e.g., "Kids learn best when they can discover and explore"); and 3) develop a good understanding of subject matter (e.g., "Those lessons worked. The kids started to skip unknown words instead of sounding them out"). On the other hand, preservice teachers placed in urban schools may: 1) become preoccupied with group management concerns (e.g., "I'm not going to let them say one word out of turn!!"); 2) come to consider students with different values, customs and language as adversaries (e.g., "I can't understand some of them and some give me trouble"); 3) develop more custodial, impersonal, rigid views about teaching (e.g., "I had to give a boy a warning because he wanted to give me two sentences instead of one!"); and 4) hold fast to previously-acquired "teacher as information giver" beliefs (e.g., "It doesn't work when I let them speak out. Nobody learns anything"). Some studies have examined the impact of school context on in-service teachers (e.g., Cole, 1990; Clandinin, 1989; Wildman, Niles, Maglioro, & McLaughlin, 1989). But, there are few published reports regarding school contextual influences on preservice teachers. Since field experiences entail complex sets of interactions among program features, settings, and people, it is important that research that seeks to understand the field experiences as occasions for learning to teach consider the dynamic and

multidimensional nature of the events being studied (Zeichner, 1987). In recent years teacher educators have begun to explore the issues of preservice teachers' implicit beliefs and subject matter knowledge (Calderhead, 1987; Richert, 1990; Weinstein, 1990). There are identifiable links between beliefs and teaching practices (Clark & Peterson, 1986) and subject matter expertise and teaching ability (Shulman, 1986). Additionally, teaching beliefs and subject matter expertise are "related to significant cognitive and affective outcomes for students" (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990).

The Elementary School Context: Oak Ridge Elementary School (a pseudonym) has an extremely permissive student-centered philosophy and a diverse, at-risk student population. The school board has considered closing Oak Ridge because of safety hazards. The roof leaks considerably; the halls and classrooms are dark and dingy; electric light bulbs hang suspended from frayed cords; window shades are torn or missing; and the walls are cracked and peeling. The majority of students consider academic studies and school attendance irrelevant. Verbal disruptions occur often. Each semester one or two students become pregnant, and occasionally a few students are suspended or expelled for aggressive behavior, carrying concealed weapons, or selling or using drugs. Of the approximately 350 students, 80% are African American, 16% European American, 3% Hispanic American, and 1% Asian American.

The Preservice Teachers: Most are "white, middle-class and female" (McDiarmid, 1990). Few have worked with groups of students prior to this experience; many have never seen the inside of an urban school; most have never closely interacted with African Americans. The participants in this longitudinal study were 75 elementary education majors (70 females; 5 males) enrolled in a reading/language arts methods block designated as an early field experience (25 students each semester for 3 semesters).

Methodology: This inquiry was designed using triangulation since "the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point" and [d]esigning a study in which multiple cases, multiple informants, or more than one data gathering are used can greatly strengthen the study's usefulness for other settings" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 146). Data were collected throughout each semester by researchers who were participants as well as investigators--two university supervisors in charge of the field program and a doctoral student serving as a research assistant. Data sources were formal and informal observations; interviews; field notes; and artifacts--texts, which "...themselves are implicated in the work of reality construction" (Atkinson, 1990). The artifacts included the following: dialogue journals; final reflective statements; and interpretations of a series of researcher-devised illustrations (a projective technique; Harmin & Gregor, 1974; and the Thematic Apperception Test) depicting 1) a reading/language arts teacher standing in

front of bored, passive students; "teacher as information giver"; students as passive receptors of information; 2) reading/language arts lessons taught in ways not in keeping with current research suggestions (e.g., teacher telling a group of first graders to memorize a list of sight words in isolation). Using constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), ethnographic guidelines (Spradley, 1979) and textual analysis procedures (Atkinson, 1990; Borko, Lalik, & Tomchin, 1987), the three researchers independently analyzed the data looking for common themes or patterns of growth in subject matter knowledge, teaching beliefs and behaviors, as well as contextual influences of the urban elementary school. The second stage of analysis involved roundtable discussions. Through this interactive process of dialoguing and revisiting the data in an inductive manner, the researchers came to a consensus about the themes or patterns.

Findings: The context of the field experience did influence the preservice teachers in many ways. The following themes emerged from this inquiry:

1. The school context in which the program operates was extremely difficult ("This was unlike any school I've ever been in. I'm not used to the way the students talked to me. I can't deal with it").
2. Most of the preservice teachers struggled to make sense of reading/language arts theories and practices ("I'm not so sure of this whole language idea yet.

Nobody has given me information proving that the old way was wrong and not effective").

3. Most of the preservice teachers entered the field experience with feelings of anxiety and apprehension ("Somehow I am afraid. I am very vulnerable"; "I woke up every hour on the hour all night").

4. After a few teaching sessions most of the preservice teachers experienced increasing frustrations ("What am I supposed to do with these kids?"; "This school is a terrible place. The kids don't listen!").

5. Over half of the preservice teachers became preoccupied with group management concerns ("Next week, no one will speak unless I tell them to!!").

6. Contrary to university supervisors' assumptions, most of the preservice teachers did not construct knowledge about reading/language arts until the end of the semester ("It wasn't until the last three weeks that it all came together like a puzzle").

7. Most of the preservice teachers developed a sense of responsibility and concern for their students' instructional and emotional needs ("I have to be able to help the children learn what's important").

8. Most of the preservice teachers came to value the field experience at Oak Ridge ("This class has taught me more about the teaching profession than

any other education class that I've taken. It is amazing how much being in the field aids in learning").

9. Most of the preservice teachers experienced a decrease in prejudice towards culturally diverse and at-risk students ("I hope they learned as much through their experience with me as I learned with them. They're not a bad bunch of kids").

10. Most of the preservice teachers became more flexible ("I learned that it is okay to stop an activity if it is not going well and try it another day. Before, I thought you had to finish doing the lesson even if it was going horrible").

Educational Implications:

1. Teacher education programs should help to reduce prospective teachers' anxieties and frustrations (e.g., role-playing, demonstration lessons, observations at the school site prior to the field experience).

2. Teacher education programs should be more cohesive (e.g., in another course prior to the field experience, preservice teachers could be helped to examine their own assumptions, expectations, and perceptions about culturally diverse children).

3. Teacher education programs should provide a variety of field placements (e.g, rural, suburban, urban).

Like other studies, this inquiry supports the conclusion that the professional development of teachers involves an interaction between specific context and the people involved (Gehrke, 1981; Kilgore, Ross, & Zbikowski, 1990; Lacey, 1977). However, we do not know how effective our program really is in changing our students' initial beliefs or in expanding their knowledge bases. "The only reliable test...is what these prospective teachers [will] do in their classrooms" (McDiarmid, 1990). Teacher educators in charge of field placements need to be aware that it is difficult to change beliefs. "Like the strands in the web of the great spider Shelob in Tolkien's (1985) Lord of the Rings, the strength of each individual belief about teaching, learning, learners, subject matter knowledge, and context is formidable" (McDiarmid, 1990).

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